

February 8

Numbers 12 (continued from February 7) and Numbers 13 and 14

Because I want to camp out in Number 13 and 14 today I will only briefly comment on chapter 12. In the sad story of Miriam and Aaron the problem is quite apparent and it is describable in one rather ugly, but common word, 'jealousy.' Moses was more important than they were. (He was also more humble, and therein lies the answer as to why God used him more.)

If you are ever tempted to be jealous of someone that God seems to be using more than you, or of someone who gets more attention than you, I want you to stop and remember two things: First - that verse we looked at back in James 3:1 - *"Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly!"* Moses may have gotten more attention, but he had an awful lot more responsibility and the burdens on him were so much greater.

Second, remember that Moses, Jesus, Paul, John and all the others got to be great by stepping down, not up. Again from James - *"Humble yourselves before the Lord and He will lift you up."* Exalt yourself and God will remove you - painfully. Humble yourself - become a servant - and He will lift you up. That is the Bible's path to greatness. Jealousy is a sure sign that the problem is not with someone else - it's with me!

Moving on to Numbers 13 and 14. For some of you, the story of Caleb, Joshua and the other ten spies who went in to spy out the Promised Land, and who brought back two diametrically opposed recommendations, is a very familiar one. Nevertheless, in spite of the familiarity of the story, there are some things here that perhaps you've never noticed before and some important lessons to be underscored.

First of all, because this chapter is usually read without the benefit of a parallel account found over in the Book of Deuteronomy 1:19-26, most of us have never understood that sending in the spies to check out the land in advance was not a plan that came from God. The spies were Israel's idea! We will not spend time looking at it today but feel free to check it out!

Now, since the idea of sending the spies came from the Israelites, they came to Moses with it - probably because they were afraid to just go in and take the land on FAITH. Their idea sounded okay to him, and he apparently asked the Lord and the Lord let them have what they wanted. This makes me think that sometimes when God reveals His plan and purpose to us we are very anxious to improve upon His plan. Has this ever been true of you? "Improving" on God's plan can be a very dangerous thing to do. Sometimes in His providence He gives us what we want - but it always turns out to be the second best way to go!

The next thing that I want you to notice is that the opposition to entering the Promised Land had nothing to do with the goodness of the land, or with any

disappointment with anything that God had told them about it. In fact, the fruit they brought back and the reports about the land proved that it was indeed a land flowing with milk and honey. It would be a wonderful place to live. The problem, of course, stemmed from their fear that they would not be able to possess the land because of the strength and size of the cities and the people who already lived there. This was the land of the Nephilim. (You may remember that we met them once before in Genesis chapter 6 in the account of the sons of God and daughters of men who co-mingled before the flood.) In this Numbers passage we have further confirmation that the Nephilim were huge people - Imagine taking land from a tribe of Shaquille-O' Neil look-alikes. *"Compared to them,"* the spies said, *"we look like grasshoppers."*

There is something else here that may not, at first, be as immediately obvious, and it has to do with the numbers involved. As nearly as we can tell, apart from Moses himself, only two men - Joshua the son of Nun, who was Moses apprentice, and Caleb, the son of Jephunneh - were willing to risk everything on faith. All of the others - more than 600,000 men over the age of 20 - including the Levites - including Aaron and his family - all of them sided with the ten spies who lacked faith. What is up with that? But that's what happened. Do you see how contagious fear and unbelief are? They are more contagious than the deadliest disease. This fear is so infectious that only Moses and two faith-filled men are willing to stand against it, and soon the multitude is afraid not only of the command of God to go in to possess the land, but also of the three men who were not afraid.

Quick activity: name the two spies who were faithful. Now name any 2 of the ten spies who were afraid. you cant. People who act in fear are never remembered. And they miss the blessings of God. Because ONE plus God make a majority. What is it that God is calling you to do to step out in faith today?

The mob gets ugly - there is much sentiment for stoning all three of these reckless adventurers on the spot, electing a new leader, and returning to Egypt. And I think they would have done it except that just at the right moment the glory of the Lord appeared at the Tent of Meeting and threw them into even more fear and confusion. And God has the last word - He always does. Moses and Caleb and Joshua are vindicated and the verdict is pronounced - all of the unbelieving generation will die in the wilderness during a forty-year period - one year for each day that the spies had spent inside the Promised Land. Only Joshua and Caleb would be allowed to go in to possess the Promised Land. The ten faithless spies die immediately, victims of a divine plague, and for the hundredth time the people conclude that they have sinned and once again they ask for God's forgiveness.

One last thing - and this is painful. God did forgive Israel - chapter 14 tells us that. But the consequences were still there - they lost the opportunity to be the first generation to enter the land of promise. When they realized what they had done, they said to Moses, 'Okay. We're sorry. Let's go now!' And they tried to, but it was too late to secure the blessing. Did you notice that? Israel actually marched toward

the Promised Land on the theory that belated obedience might win back the favor of God, but Moses didn't go with them. The Tabernacle stayed where it was because the cloud that signified the presence of God didn't move. God wasn't in it. Chapter 14 says, *"In their presumption they went up,"* and the Amalekites and Canaanites gave them a terrible beating and sent them back down to spend a whole generation wandering in the wilderness, because they had refused to trust God's promise.

My friends, sometimes God speaks to us very clearly and gives us enormous opportunities to serve Him, to bring great glory to His name, and to experience His richest blessing. If, because of fear and unbelief, we miss these opportunities, they may not come again. Within days of the spies return, a repentant Israel was ready to do the will of God, but their moment had passed; the opportunity was gone and they lived the rest of their lives with the bitter memory of what might have been.

May God help us to respond in faith when His call to us is clear.